

## **Sermon - St Michael's Bryanston 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020**

### Readings

Acts 2: 42-47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2: 19-25

John 10: 1-10

Once before, when a church of which I was part ran a sermon series on the “I am” saying of Jesus, I was given the “I am the Good Shepherd” one. As part of my preparation I got a book on animal husbandry and learned what I could about sheep. I have forgotten most of what I read, but one phrase remains, which says, something like “Sheep are not stupid. They are fairly intelligent, but are very easily confused.”

I think, that in this Covid19 time, we would all agree that, in spite of the considerable international intelligence of all kinds, and the technology to communicate the words of experts from all over the world, we are all mightily confused. We have passed the initial euphoria where we were going to fight this thing together, to now being frustrated and bored with Lockdown, poverty is beginning to bite hard those who can least withstand it, and the normal channels of charity or state distribution are hamstrung, never mind that extended family meals, church services, hobbies, staff canteens, and all other places where we would talk these things over are closed to us and we sit in relative isolation fed by a sometimes hysterical media flavoured by our own dark forebodings.

And there are many thieves and robbers who would break in and steal. We have those who steal the food parcels due to the poorest in our land. There are retailers who strip the factories of PPE's so that the panicking rich can stockpile all the sanitisers, face masks, and gloves they can find, and our shop assistants, health care workers and others on the front line have to struggle with less protection.

And of course, social media is going berserk. This virus which is so totally out of our control has made us scared, and like frightened children, we shout at anything. We blame governments, the rich, the poor, the anti-ecologists, the virologists, the Chinese, the Americans, the whites, the blacks, the scientists, germ-warfare – anything that could possibly give us a reason why this is happening in our normally predictable world.

And we so, so long for a visible, capable Shepherd as we pray for those who have lost jobs, and whose families are perilously near starvation, those who are lonely, who are ill with this virus, and for those who have lost people to it, We turn to our faith and our hopes rise whenever there is a new theory, and fall when it falls along with all those that went before it, and we go back to God and pull the tatters of our faith around our shaking hearts, hoping that we will be led through this Valley of the Shadow by a currently invisible shepherd before too much damage and loss occurs.

Jesus was speaking in terms of sheep and their care in today's gospel. A shepherd was one who would give each sheep a name, and that sheep would learn the sound of the shepherd's voice and would recognize its own name when called. A shepherd didn't have a sheep dog to drive the sheep where they were supposed to go, nor were the sheep managed by a herder who walked alongside the herd with a stick, as we so often see on South Africa roads when we pass herds of cows or goats in our more rural areas. Instead, the shepherd would lead the sheep, using his voice to keep them on the right path. The crook would be to stop them from straying and to haul them out of danger.

During summer months, the sheep wouldn't be taken back to the village at night, but would be herded into enclosures, like kraals. These walls would be made out of whatever materials were available, and there would be one gap through which they could come in and go out. At night the shepherd slept in that gap, so no sheep could escape without the shepherd being woken and made aware of their efforts. Thieves and robbers would try to go over the walls or else, during the day, distract the sheep out in the open. It would take the voice of the shepherd to calm them down and bring them back to the safety of the flock once the intruder had been dealt with.

So if Jesus is our shepherd, and we are his confused sheep, how do we hear his voice?

Firstly, we need to KNOW his voice first. We need to soak ourselves in the things of God. Our knowledge of the Bible and its meaning, our understanding of Jesus and the sacrificial love that he gave so freely – all this will show us what a Kingdom of heaven world will look like. That will arm us against the confusing voices of false prophets.

Secondly, we “hear” the voice of Jesus when we recognize generous, intelligent goodness in any situation. What is NOT Jesus’ voice is selfishness of any kind. But we also need to hear goodness as a discipline. It is very easy to be emotionally aroused and to waste our resources when our response is a sentimental one, rather than an informed one. In fact we see this in today’s reading in Acts. These early Christians devoted themselves to learning, to communion, and to sharing everything and to living in community with everyone “with glad and sincere hearts.” In addition, everything they did praised God and “enjoyed the favour of the people.” The fact that numbers were added daily meant that others recognized the godliness in them and wanted to be part of this life too.

All of that is the way God has been working throughout the ages. But I think the question in everyone’s mind now is, where is God in a Covid-19 world? I think the answer can be found in Psalm 23. Here we see again that God is the shepherd who leads us to good food and down safe paths. But we face something else in verses 4 and 5 “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” The main point here is in the word “through.” God is not going to take us away from the suffering, but will lead us through it. His rod and staff will do what any shepherd’s tools of the trade will do – will lead us through, keeping us out of danger and prodding us if we are straying. But God will lay a table for us even in the presence of our enemies – the enemies are still there even though this is an image of victory. So we can know without doubt that whatever happens, God is with us even if the circumstances are not particularly heavenly ones.

But God isn’t only our protector. He is also our guide and decision-maker, and the best way we can serve God in the current crisis is to see what the virus is teaching us. One lesson I think is government complacency. Many countries were totally unprepared, vffffvd medically at least, and the results have been devastating. While we can be proud of our president and the way our country has approached this virus, we have to be honest and admit that all sectors of our own country have spent too much time on ideologies, processes, chasing selfish money and empty formalities and we have not done all we could in getting down to tackle head on the problems of poverty and unemployment, and those poor will be damaged most heavily if this virus takes hold. Secondly, it is showing that we cannot do what we like with the natural world and expect to survive. Devastating fires in Brazil, California and Australia were a signal that something is desperately wrong. Now this. This is not the first devastating virus,

and many are sourced through unmanaged meat. The HIV virus started in Africa with the consumption of gorilla meat. Ebola was traced to a fruit bat. Covid 19 one appears to have come through the unregulated slaughtering of pangolins and possibly bats. All three of these animals are highly endangered. We have got to take note of what the environmental scientists are telling us. We have been warned by many experts that there are more viruses to come unless we take the piteous cries of our world very seriously. Those are two things. I'm sure you can think of others if we prayerfully look at ourselves.

If we want to hear the voice of our shepherd we will know that there are no easy answers. Jesus' way is the way of the cross, and miracles will come through patience, hard work, humility and sacrifice. It is only when the old sin is truly dead can we look forward to a resurrection because the new life will definitely be very different.

Perhaps it's not by accident that the timing of Covid-19 has cut into Easter, Passover and Ramadan. While I'm certain God didn't cause it, - we know where this plague came from - but God is using this time to speak loudly to the three religions that stem from the same source – there is only one God, one creator, and one shepherd who at the moment is calling loudly, is longing to forgive our sins and lead us to freedom. His crook is stretched out at the very end of his arm. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

After all, Jesus is risen. He is alive, and is with us – always.